
Citation:

Mitchell, TO and Nesti, M and Richardson, D and Midgley, AW and Eubank, M and Littlewood, M (2014) Exploring athletic identity in elite-level English youth football: a cross-sectional approach. J Sports Sci, 32 (13). pp. 1294-1299. ISSN 1466-447X DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2014.898855>

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Exploring Athletic Identity in Top Class English Youth Football:

A Cross Sectional Approach

Submitted July 2012

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore levels of athletic identity in professional youth footballers. One hundred and sixty eight elite youth footballers from the English professional football leagues completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Multilevel modelling was used to examine the effect of playing level, living arrangements, and year of apprentice on the total AIMS score and scores on its subscales, social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity. ‘Individual football club’ was included in the model as a random factor. Football club explained 30% of the variance in exclusivity among players ($p = .022$). Mean social identity was significantly higher for those players in the first year of their apprentice compared to those in their second year ($p = .025$). All other effects were not statistically significant ($p > .05$). The implications for practitioners and further research are discussed.

Keywords: sport psychology, career transition, talent development, deselection

To excel in elite professional football, players typically form a strong bond with their chosen sport. After participating at beginner level (e.g., youth sport), most

individuals choose to specialize in a sport in which they are most skilled (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Family, friends, coaches, teachers, and in some cases, media influences, often support the goal of advancement in that sport and consequently, young players may begin to form an athletic identity (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). This has been defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993, p 237).

Where athletic identity has been seen to be strong, but not exclusive to the athletic role, long lasting psychological benefits to the athlete have been seen, such as more social interactions, more positive athletic experiences and increased motivation in North American student-athletes (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000). Those who place too strong an emphasis on their athletic identity become somewhat one-dimensional, for example, they may solely see themselves as a sports person. (:) As a result athletes may experience psychological or behavioural disturbance such as overtraining or anxiety when unable to train e.g., through injury (Coen & Ogles, 1993; Higgins, 1987; Horton & Mack, 2000; Showers, 1992 and Sparkes, 1998, 2000). Such negative effects may also occur during transitional processes such as retirement or de-selection (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). In addition, such athletes may experience a lack of post career planning skills and activities compounding the effects of transition or de-selection (Blann 1986; Marcia, 1966; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996). Athletes who are somewhat one-dimensional may also have severely restricted the development of other roles within the self such as spouse, brother or friend (Wiechman & Williams, 1997).

Introduction

Youth team footballers spend a high percentage of their time in training and competition. To live, breathe and eat football has been strongly encouraged within youth development environments and it is perceived to evoke increased levels of dedication and commitment to reaching professional status (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). McGillivray & McIntosh (2006) reported one Scottish youth team football player as saying “Any time I had to think, I was just thinking about football” (p. 378). As a result, it is reasonable to suggest that if players are exposed to formalised training and competition from as young as 5 years old (Football Association, 2010), some individuals may be at risk of developing an overly strong athletic identity by the age of 18 years.

This has previously been referred to as identity foreclosure (Marica, Waterman, Matteson, Archers, & Orlofsky, 1993; Petitpas, 1978). According to Marcia (1966) foreclosure occurs when individuals prematurely make a commitment to an occupation or ideology (e.g. a career in football). A foreclosed individual may appear to gain the benefits of a strong identity with regard to being a footballer, but is less able to cope with external forces such as injury, transition or de-selection.

Identity foreclosure has been indirectly reported in youth team football where players routinely sacrifice social and educational aspects of their lives to focus on their major and often only goal in life: that of becoming a professional footballer (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Parker, 2000). However, 85% of those young players who embark on a professional football career will fail to achieve their goal (Lally, 2007). The high failure rates in the transition from youth to professional football in England advocates that it is pertinent to explore the level of athletic identity in such a population as those players who fail to make a professional career may be at risk of negative psychological effects and difficult transitional experiences if their career is

prematurely terminated (Brown & Potrac, 2009). With regard to player performance, Nesti (2004) and Nesti & Littlewood (2009) suggest such identity foreclosure may inhibit players' abilities to make the best use of their talents and hinder their capability to cope with daily challenges such as continual scrutiny, injury, or being dropped from the starting line-up throughout their youth and possible professional careers.

There is a lack of empirical research on athletic identity in elite youth team football players. Coaches and support staff may benefit from such information especially during critical moments, such as transition, as it may help to identify those most at risk of psychological disturbance and offer bespoke support mechanisms. The aim of this study is to gain a critical understanding of the level of athletic identity in elite youth team footballers using level of play, individual club, year of apprenticeship and living arrangements to explore any differentiating factors that affect levels of Athletic Identity within this population.

Method

Participants

A total of 168 youth team football players aged 16-18 years spread across the four major English professional leagues were recruited for this study. Within each club, players currently signed to a two year apprenticeship were eligible to participate. Professional football clubs were targeted and contacted through a range of methods including e-mail, letter and telephone. The aim of this process was to secure access to three clubs from each of the four major English professional leagues.

Material and Procedure

Packs containing participant information sheets, informed consent, demographic questionnaire and the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer &

Cornelius, 2001) were administered by the researcher after training at each club. Evidence for the test-retest reliability over a two-week period ($r = .89$) and internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$ to $.93$) of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) has been obtained (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte & Mahar, 1993). It must be noted that internal consistency has yet to be gained for the three subscales and so any findings from these should be viewed with caution. The current version of AIMS is a 7-item questionnaire (Brewer & Cornelius 2001), where responses are made on a 7-point likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores on the AIMS range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of athletic identity. The total AIMS score is typically used to differentiate between independent variables, e.g., sporting levels (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). AIMS is comprised of three subscales: social identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual views him/herself as occupying the role of an athlete and includes AIMS items 1-3); exclusivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual's self-worth is established through participating in the athletic role and includes items 4-5); and negative affectivity (i.e., the degree to which an individual experiences negative emotions from unwanted sporting outcomes and includes items 6-7).

A self-report supplementary questionnaire was also administered to capture demographic data about each participant, including questions relating to level of play (based on the first team at the football club), year of apprenticeship (year 1 or 2 of the apprenticeship) and living arrangements (living at home or away from home). Variables were chosen as they represent key differentiating factors within and across a youth team squads. The aim of gaining demographic data was to identify potential factors which may influence levels of athletic identity.

Statistical Methods

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The central tendency and dispersion of the AIMS scores and each of the subscales (social identity, exclusivity, and negativity affectivity) for the sample data were described as the mean and standard deviation. Inferences about the effects of playing level, year of apprenticeship, and living arrangements on AIMS and the three subscales were made using multilevel mixed effects models. Football club was specified in each model as a random factor and playing level, year of apprenticeship, and living arrangements were specified as fixed factors. The statistical significance of each random effect was established using the Wald test, using a one-tailed p value. The residuals for each model exhibited substantial negative skewness, which was rectified by cubed transformation of the observed data. Two-tailed statistical significance was accepted as $p < .05$.

Results

There were 168 individual respondents from 12 football clubs from the four English professional leagues: Premier League ($n = 36$), Championship ($n = 44$), League 1 ($n = 44$) and League 2 ($n = 44$). The respondents consisted of year one apprentices ($n = 83$), year two apprentices ($n = 85$), those living at home ($n = 101$) and those living away from home ($n = 67$). Descriptive statistics for the four outcome variables for all the players and also according to playing level, whether or not the players were living at home or away, and year of apprentice are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Multilevel modelling showed that 'football club' accounted for 6% of the variability in negative affectivity (Wald $Z = 1.1$, $p = .14$) and 12% in AIMS (Wald Z

= 1.5, $p = .061$), although the 30% explained variance in exclusivity was the only outcome variable that reached statistical significance (Wald $Z = 2.0$, $p = .022$). Very little variability between clubs existed for social identity and this was set to zero by the multilevel model.

Mean AIMS ($F = 0.5$, $p = .68$), social identity ($F = 0.5$, $p = .67$), exclusivity ($F = 0.8$, $p = .53$), and negative affectivity ($F = 0.04$, $p = .99$) were not significantly different in the four leagues. Whether or not players lived at home or away also did not have any significant effect on AIMS ($F = 1.3$, $p = .25$), social identity ($F = 1.3$, $p = .26$), exclusivity ($F = 2.5$, $p = .12$), or negative affectivity ($F = 0.26$, $p = .61$). Mean social identity was 0.7 points higher for those players in the first year of their apprenticeship compared to those in the second year ($F = 5.1$, $p = .025$). Year of apprenticeship, however, did not have any significant effect on AIMS ($F = 2.0$, $p = .16$), exclusivity ($F = 1.0$, $p = .33$), or negative affectivity ($F = 0.007$, $p = .94$). Two-way and three-way interactions between factors were entered into all multilevel models; however, these were not retained because none were statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore athletic identity in a sample of youth team footballers and assess any differences in athletic identity across a range of demographic variables namely, level of play, individual club, year of apprenticeship (year one or year two) and living arrangements (living at home or away from home).

With regard to 'individual football club', there were no significant differences reported for overall Athletic Identity. This may be because despite differences in the requirements for football academies and centres of excellence within England and across Europe, most have a similar organisational structure which typically requires heavy investment in facilities and staff (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, &

Richardson, 2010; Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). It is also accepted that the common overriding aim of youth development programmes at any football club is to produce suitably skilled players for the first team (Bourke, 2002; Holt & Mitchell, 2006; Relvas et al., 2010). As a result it appears all players develop largely similar levels of Athletic Identity. With regard to the exclusivity subscale being significantly different between clubs it may be postulated that individual staff, organisational culture, working practices and the general environment within each club may be the overriding factor in exclusivity development. When the findings were analysed as a function of the level of play no significant differences were found for total AIMS score nor any subscale. This contradicts reports from other sporting domains and associated performance levels. Horton & Mack (2000) reported a significant relationship between athletic identity and personal best times in marathon runners. Lamont-Mills & Christensen (2006) also reported significant differences for AIMS total amongst elite, recreational and non-participant. Brewer & Cornelius (2001) also reported significant differences ($p < .05$) in total AIMS score between athletes and non athletes with athletes reporting higher levels of AI. With regard to the present study this ranking has been made on the first team level of play and may not fully reflect the status of the structure, staffing and environment at each football club. For example a lower league club may have a well resourced and successful academy system.

Living arrangement showed no effect on athletic identity or any subscales suggesting that players away from family or at their familial home.. High levels of discipline, resilience and mental toughness have been championed as essential prerequisites in the development of talent in youth team football players and their associated athletic identities (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt &

Mitchell, 2006; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Parker, 2000; Roderick, 2006). The findings suggest such notions are not magnified or reduced as a result of living arrangements.

When respondents were viewed in terms of them being a year one or a year two apprentice, it was those in year one who reported significantly higher levels of social identity. It would appear that those players in the first year of their apprenticeship see themselves more as a footballer than those in their second year. Such findings support previous work on the saliency of athletic identity and its dependence on factors such as current athletic circumstance (Grove, Fish & Eklund, 2004; Lavalley, Gordon & Groves, 1997). It could be suggested that year one apprentices more deeply occupy the role of being a footballer due to them making the transition from school boy to a full time regime (League Football Education, 2010). It is possible, that by the time the year one apprentices enter their second year, and they may have been exposed to the reality of low progression levels amounting to 15 % (Lally, 2007) and the subsequent realisation that they might not make the grade of professional footballer. Such a decrease in social identity in year two players may be the result of some form of divestment from athletic identity as a defence mechanism to protect their ego (Snyder, 1988). Such an assumption cannot be substantiated by AIMS alone and would need more qualitative methods (e.g., Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001) to be employed to explore how athletic identity is created through gaining a deeper understanding of the day to day lived experiences of youth team footballers.

AIMS itself does not account for the processes in the development of athletic identity (e.g., the role of the coaching team, family and general lived experiences of youth team footballers). Other possible theoretical and methodological perspectives may provide a greater understanding of the development of athletic identity and

identity in its broadest sense. Erikson's (1968) eight stages of psychosocial development model has been tentatively referenced in the athletic identity literature (e.g., Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) as being a potential theoretical framework in understanding the development of athletic identity. Erikson views identity as a fluid and transitional phenomenon, which develops through a series of crises and resolutions throughout life and has both positive and negative elements that shape who we are and what we become. The career path from entry into football through to school-boy, apprenticeship and eventually professional carries similar notions of crises and resolutions as player's progress in their careers. It is therefore recommended that further research in this area should seek to adopt this broader framework to further understand how athletic identity develops.

It is hoped that this exploratory study can allow for further investigation into Athletic Identity within elite youth footballers and the developments of more normative data. However, there are some limitations within this study and beyond. Further work on the validation of the AIMS subscales needs to be undertaken to ensure their validity and use by researchers and practitioners alike. AIMS does not provide contextual information relating to variables such as working environment and the influence of coaches, although it may be useful as a screening tool for new and existing players. More longitudinal studies and observations are also required to explore changes in athletic identity over time (e.g., specific points of the season or regularly over the whole two year apprenticeship) to better understand where specific player support may be best placed. Further research should be undertaken to explore the environment created by individual clubs and more specifically by coaches who appear to affect levels of exclusivity and social identity in this population. The current findings may be of use

to professionals such as coaches, sport psychologists and education and welfare officers in identifying youth team football players who are potentially more at risk of identity foreclosure and associated negative experiences during critical moments such as transition. The development of athletic identity and subsequent association with the role of being a youth team footballer appears to be more influenced by the year of apprenticeship and the environment created within each club more so than a function of the clubs playing level or players living arrangements. Players in year one of an apprenticeship perceive themselves more as footballers (social identity), than their year two counterparts. Strategies to promote similar identification in year two apprentices may need to be implemented in order to maintain factors such motivation and performance levels which may ultimately affect chances of career progression.

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Table 1. Mean (SD) athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for youth football players according to which English professional league they play in.

	Playing level			
	League 2 (<i>n</i> = 44)	League 1 (<i>n</i> = 44)	Championshi P (<i>n</i> = 44)	Premiership (<i>n</i> = 36)
Total AIMS	39.4 (6.6)	40.2 (5.3)	40.4 (4.0)	42.0 (4.4)
Social identity	16.4 (2.8)	16.7 (2.0)	16.5 (1.7)	17.0 (2.3)
Exclusivity	10.6 (2.7)	11.5 (2.3)	11.5 (1.9)	12.5 (1.6)
Negative affectivity	12.4 (2.0)	12.2 (2.3)	12.3 (1.7)	12.5 (1.8)

Table 2. Mean (SD) athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS), social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity for 168 professional youth football players according to whether they were living at home or away, or whether they were in the first or second year of their apprenticeship.

	Living arrangements		Year of apprenticeship	
	Home (<i>n</i> = 101)	Away (<i>n</i> = 67)	Year 1 (<i>n</i> = 83)	Year 2 (<i>n</i> = 85)
Total AIMS	40.0 (5.4)	41.1 (4.9)	41.1 (4.3)	39.8 (6.0)
Social identity	16.5 (2.3)	16.8 (2.1)	17.1 (2.0)	16.2 (2.4)
Exclusivity	11.1 (2.5)	12.0 (1.8)	11.7 (2.0)	11.3 (2.5)
Negative affectivity	12.4 (1.8)	12.2 (2.2)	12.4 (1.6)	12.3 (2.2)